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ABSTRACT

The way that the state can commit resources to provide students with the most useful and appropriate education information is considered, along with options for cooperation with postsecondary institutions through state policies and programs. Five levels of enforcement by which the state can assume its responsibility to control the quality of services it supports are as follows: laissez faire, monitoring, provision of inducements to affect change, regulation, and absolute control. A laissez-faire approach implies complete responsibility and self-regulation on the part of those providing recruitment services, while absolute control by the state government is the opposite extreme. Licensure and registration of institutions are monitoring functions, and inducements to affect change can involve adding or cutting back state appropriations. Regulation has affected the content and availability of education information provided during the admissions process. States have increased their policy regulatory efforts for consumer protection in general, but have made minimal impact in applying these policies to postsecondary education. The most prominent application of state regulations to the area of recruitment has been directed at private institutions. Three program level objectives are available for the state to contribute to better recruitment information: research, technical assistance, and information development and dissemination. State resources that can aid postsecondary recruitment efforts include the Education Information and Education Opportunity Centers, Comprehensive Employment and Training programs, post-high school testing, and financial aid and career information system programs. Reference is made to policies/programs in Minnesota. (SW)

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Improving Recruitment Information, Whose Prerogative? State Agency vs. Institutional Efforts

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THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the Twenty-First Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Leamington Hotel in Minneapolis, Minnesota, May 17-20, 1981. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Mary Corcoran
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(Editor, AIR Forum Publications)

ABSTRACT

Several trends have contributed to a growing interest in better education information for students. At the center of this interest has been the improvement of recruitment information. This has developed for two key reasons: an interest by post-secondary institutions in capturing a more predictable segment of the student market, and a need to adapt to roles and responsibilities imposed when the consumer-provider relationship is applied to education.

While most references to the need for improving education information have emphasized the institutional role and those addressing recruitment related problems focus on institutional self-regulation, there is a role for the state to play in confronting both concerns. This paper discusses how the state can be, has been, and should be committing resources to the objective of providing students with the most useful and appropriate education information. It presents options for cooperation with post-secondary institutions through state policies and programs.

The "better information for students" movement has been a more obvious presence during the past ten years--obvious not only in the halls of post-secondary institutions and high schools, but also in the halls of congress and state capitols nationwide. Given that most post-secondary information originates from institutions through their recruitment functions, the target of the movement includes recruitment information.

What is better information for students? The final report of the National Task Force on Better Information for Student Choice (El-Khawas, 1977) defined it in relative terms, "meaning information that is more detailed, more candid, or more accurate and complete than before." Several trends have contributed to the growing interest in better student information: expanding opportunities for "lifelong learning" and the new student's information needs; greater acceptance of the consumer-provider relationship between students and educators, and resulting concern for consumer protection in education; increasing court intervention in defining student and educator legal obligations; greater insight into the student marketplace due to institutional market research; greater competition for students due to a declining college age population and education budget restraints; and a greater concern for linking education with career choices when making education decisions.

These trends affect educators, students and policymakers and transform many of the traditional rights and responsibilities associated with post-secondary education. Included in that transformation are the rights and responsibilities applied to education information. Also included is the necessity for affirmative responses by every party affected, through planning and implementing activities designed to produce better information for student choice.

Therefore, it is not particularly appropriate to ask "whose prerogative?" it is to improve recruitment information. While some education operations

may still be assigned to one party through clear lines of responsibility, it is more likely and desirable for public and private educators, consumers and policymakers to work cooperatively towards improving education. To depend only on post-secondary institutions may place false limits on planning efforts and the consequent success in producing information that is more detailed, candid, accurate and complete. Not only is participation by the many affected and interested parties a reasonable way to protect against abusing those interests, it is also a logical way to tap resources that can collectively outweigh those of post-secondary institutions alone.

Involving state level post-secondary education interests (e.g. the legislature, coordinating and/or governing bodies) need not summon visions of more regulation and less institutional autonomy. Such involvement should be considered an opportunity for supporting the objectives of a changing recruitment function. An overview of the options available to and used by the state will demonstrate that there has been and continues to be a state role in pursuing quality in recruitment.

State Options

Inherent in state constitutional and statutory authority for education are the responsibilities for enforcing reasonable control over the quality of services supported. Historically, by virtue of law or tradition, five levels of enforcement can be identified. Callan and Jonsen (1976) described those levels as: laissez-faire, monitoring, provision of inducements to affect change, regulation and absolute control.

A laissez-faire approach implies complete responsibility and self-regulation on the part of those providing recruitment services. While self-regulation continues to be an important institutional expression of concern, it cannot operate in a vacuum because of the inherent conflict in assuring one's own accountability. To balance judgments regarding how in-

stitutions do and should act we have traditionally relied on external parties with accreditation or licensing responsibilities.

The second level of state involvement is that of performing a monitoring function. Relying on licensure and/or registration, the state can be actively involved in assessing areas of concern as well as encouraging institutional responsibility for maintaining at least minimum standards of performance. The monitoring function has been a common response in all areas of consumer protection and, given the consumer related concerns currently evident in post-secondary recruitment or "marketing," this form of input becomes more standard. The registration of private institutions is evidence of that trend as is a 1980 national survey of state involvement in recruitment, conducted by the Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Board, which reported that one state, Alaska, requires recruiting personnel to be licensed and bonded in order to work in that state.

The third level, provision of inducement to affect change, can function in conjunction with other levels. The adding or cutting back of state appropriations can be an effective incentive for encouraging adherence to recruitment standards. It is speculated that most state governments are unaware of the total funds dedicated to education information activities and, if they were the inducement strategy would be a more prominent tool for controlling costs and quality.

Regulation, the fourth level of state involvement, has been a prolific means for both state and federal policymakers to have an impact on education information standards and, therefore, recruitment. As a well used tool in all areas of government interest, regulation has affected the content and availability of education information provided during the admissions process. A report of the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education (1979)

took note of the federal regulations affecting institutional student information. Agencies with disclosure requirements include the Federal Trade Commission, Veterans Administration, Department of Education, Internal Revenue Service, Postal Service, Office of Civil Rights, and the Department of Justice. In addition, the Minnesota national survey previously cited showed three states that currently regulate post-secondary recruitment activities: Alaska requiring bonding and licensure of recruiters, Iowa limiting media advertisements to off-campus programs, and Oregon requiring all advertising and publicity to emanate from the Department of Higher Education.

The last and most restrictive means for states to affect recruitment is that of absolute control over the information developed and disseminated. Although this power is not exercised by any states, the Oregon and Iowa regulation language would imply their right to invoke such control. There are obviously many problems inherent in this approach. In a climate where concern for better information is evident, while blatant abuse of recruitment standards is still uncommon, such control is not needed or advisable.

While institutions and the state will be subject to a variety of conditions affecting their recruitment related activities, both will seek quality assurance based on common principles of good information and practice; principles of objectivity, timeliness, readability, access, accuracy and adherence to professionally and legally accepted standards for content and delivery. With these common principles as a foundation, the state and education information providers have the basis for a cooperative relationship while still being able to maintain their unique responsibilities for serving the education consumer.

Current State Activities

While most studies and literature addressing "better information for

students" have focused primarily on the role of institutions, and those addressing recruitment problems focus on institutional self-regulation, there is a strong presence of the state and federal government that must be recognized. As summarized by the Carnegie report (1979),

> ... state agencies have an important role to play in the student-institutional relationship, beyond the roles of the institutions themselves ... Education is a state responsibility ... The federal government's role in education is tied to the spending and commence powers granted by the U. S. Constitution. The federal government would have minimal influence on the relationship between students and colleges if institutions chose not to participate in federally funded programs.

State participation in better recruitment information can be categorized into two primary sources: policies and programs.

Policies

Federal policies directing student information and recruitment activities have grown with the federal fiscal commitment to post-secondary education. In measurable contrast, states have increased their policy regulatory efforts for consumer protection in general, but have made minimal impact in applying these policies to post-secondary education.

The most prominent application of state regulations to the area of recruitment has been directed at private institutions. In Minnesota, for example, the Private Institution Registration Act asserts state interest in recruitment standards by ensuring disclosure of certain information to prospective students. Similar legislation has been adopted by at least 35 states to assure prospective students of protection against misrepresentation by degree granting private institutions.

General consumer protection policies may be applied to education, but have

been so on a very limited basis. Consumer protection concepts such as truth in advertising and cooling off periods have only been loosely associated with post-secondary recruitment, most frequently at the federal level. However, this may change rapidly, becoming more universal given the trend toward accepting the student-educator relationship as one of consumer and provider. As Mackey (1980) notes, "The new students are indeed behaving like customers ... By now college administrators should be aware that the courts recognize a legal contract relationship between an institution and a student."

States such as Oregon, Iowa and Alaska are still the exception in establishing policies clearly intended to regulate recruitment. A need for adoption of similar legislation by other states has not been clearly demonstrated and is not expected to be unless uncontrolled problems become obvious to law makers. It should be assumed that the sentiment of both post-secondary educators and the state will continue to be a reluctance to use the regulatory avenue to curb recruitment abuses, while more positive options remain.

What more positive options are available to both post-secondary and state interests? One may be the professional association acting to establish standards of practice for recruitment. However, while associations such as the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC) and the Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (ACRAO) have developed and endorsed standards of practice, there is evidence that those standards are not widely recognized by their members or consumers. A Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Board 1980 survey of five professional association presidents with members involved in recruitment and education information activity, and 105 information providers and consumers, showed that 65% were unaware of the Statement of Principles of Good Practices in College Admissions and Recruitment developed and endorsed by the NACAC, ACRAO, College

Board, National Association of Secondary School Principals and the American Council on Education. Considering this wide endorsement, the lack of recognition is surprising and the statement impact should be questioned.

Given the apparent minimal impact of government and professional policy on recruitment activities, the state should use existing programs to more actively benefit consumers and post-secondary education without further regulation. There are many state-administered program resources with responsibilities related to providing education information, and which often perform or affect recruitment functions.

Programs

Many agencies and organizations provide post-secondary information, usually relying on institutional recruitment literature as a guidepost. As noted by El-Khawas (1977), "Even though prospective students obtain information from many sources ... it is the information that institutions provide about themselves that serves as the basis for almost all other information sources." In Minnesota, over 50 education information providers have been identified besides high school counselors, college, job service, and social service personnel. Few of these rely on funding from non-state sources. It is assumed that this is also true in most other states. If so, states should capitalize on this investment to contribute to better recruitment information. Three program level objectives are available for the state to make this contribution: research, technical assistance, and information development and dissemination.

Improving recruitment information goes beyond the outcomes of higher enrollments and retention levels. If what we seek is a more consumer responsive product, than we must develop information that responds to the demand for the principals previously mentioned. To do so, the information provider must define the interests, demographics and capabilities of the

information consumer or prospective student, and must relate those to a strategy for improving recruitment information. Institutions themselves may have the capacity to do this through research staff, however, other research resources do exist at the state level.

State higher education coordinating agencies have a primary responsibility of conducting education research. To support their efforts they become a valuable repository of information on student characteristics, academic programs and education trends affecting enrollments and retention. While this function varies with each state, the potential for cooperation between institutions and state higher education agencies is great in every state. The opportunity to take advantage of state level research resources to improve recruitment has not been well explored, possibly because of the natural sense of institutional uniqueness that suggests the need for research applied to each institution. While this uniqueness factor may indeed require a more narrow focus than that provided by external research efforts, it is certainly advisable for both resources to be considered in recruitment planning. This will support the need for better, more coordinated use of resources without duplicating efforts, and should contribute to better recruitment information.

The second state level program objective applicable to recruitment information is the provision of technical and/or fiscal assistance to those involved in recruitment. State activities concerned with both the secondary and post-secondary level can be instrumental in this effort. At the secondary level, counselors and career education personnel, for example, can work with post-secondary institutions in the development of better recruitment information by providing insight into the traditional, high school level prospective college student, and assistance in designing appropriate recruitment information and techniques.

With post-secondary interests, state administered efforts such as the Education Information and Education Opportunity Centers, Comprehensive Employment and Training, post-high school testing, financial aids and career information system programs should take an active role. An example of such involvement occurred in Minnesota when the Education Information Centers program and four regional education centers cosponsored five workshops for over 200 education information providers and consumers. The workshops provided participants with an opportunity to discuss the status of recruitment information, and to learn of research developments in the area of education information as well as the possible application of those developments to their own information efforts. Ideally, such an opportunity will affect the quality of education information without infringing on institutional autonomy. Other state programs may also have the resources available to facilitate research and/or activities that will refine the development and base of information used as recruitment tools. Taking advantage of these resources can certainly be profitable for post-secondary recruitment efforts.

A third objective, one of many state programs, is the development and dissemination of education information. As previously noted, most education information has originated in the post-secondary institution. It is possible, however, to identify other sources such as statewide hotlines, career information systems and information targeted at special interest groups such as part-time students, veterans and the handicapped. State agencies producing such information share with post-secondary institutions the responsibility to provide accurate and comprehensive resources; to continually work toward better information not just with enrollment increases as an objective, but primarily because of their public responsibility to the education consumer.

These resources, plus institutional admissions and recruitment activities, represent a considerable state resource commitment. A shared effort to improve

recruitment information will fulfill the state role of consumer education and protection, will possibly result in better student and institutional planning and ultimately will make better use of education resources.

Final Comments

Providing for improved recruitment information is not so clear a task that it affects only the post-secondary education community. Recruiting students involves information flowing from and supported by many other sources, one of which is the state and its entities. As long as institutions rely on and benefit from the education information activities of these state administered or supported resources, the state's place in efforts to improve recruitment information should be acknowledged. Complimenting this recognition, the state should direct resources to support the objectives of better information for students.

Better information activities of the state should work in cooperation with and in support of institutional efforts. The examples and suggestions made above will not impose on or restrict institutional autonomy. Rather, if applied, they should increase the ability to achieve a goal of providing education consumers with information that will respond to their interests and meet institutional needs, without compromising the ability of institutions to compete successfully in the student marketplace. Instead, such cooperative effort and use of complimentary resources should enhance success in the student market.

The Statement of Principles of Good Practice in Admissions and Recruitment noted earlier was revised in 1979, and the revisions define the previously unrecognized responsibilities of Community Agencies. It is time to recognize, as those revisions do, that education recruitment does not function solely from institutions and, because of that, recruitment improvements are not the sole responsibility of institutions.

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